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# Lest We Forget: The Passage from Africa to Slavery and Emancipation

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## **Lest We Forget: The Passage from Africa to Slavery and Emancipation**

**Velma Maia Thomas, Crown Publishers Inc., New York, 1997.**

*Ed Hood, Old Sturbridge Village*

In *Lest We Forget: The Passage from Africa to Slavery and Emancipation*, Velma Maia Thomas, creator and curator of the Black Holocaust Museum, provides an accessible overview and perspective on the enslavement of Africans in America. The book includes "interactive" features, primarily facsimiles of period documents, pertaining to the slave trade and to the experiences of those who were enslaved. From a paper reproduction of a tobacco can one can produce the treasured manumission papers of Robert Green, who had been enslaved in Missouri until set free by his owner in 1838. The facsimile copy captures the folded and worn character of the original paper, and even includes an additional note on its back from the former owner stating that "Should the bearer Robert Green be so unfortunate as to be placed in any situation that may require aid or friends and cannot procure, if any gentleman that will write me and of his situation will greatly oblige". The effect is similar to handling the actual artifact, making Robert Green's experience that much more real for the reader. Photographs and first-hand accounts of life under slavery help make the terrible pain and enormous scope of African enslavement in America tangible and personal.

The book is divided into self-contained sections composed of the two facing pages in front of the reader -- providing a succinct but effective exposure to a variety of issues associated with slavery: the Middle Passage, The Auction, "seasoning", childhood under slavery, emancipation, and so forth. The color format of this book includes half-toned images behind the text, photographs of individuals, cut-out details of artifacts such as a whip, reproduced period documents such as fugitive slave advertisements, and other historic engravings and images. Transcriptions are provided at the end of the book for the period documents reproduced in facsimile form (though I did not realize this until I had read the entire book and was flipping through its last pages). The text includes enough detailed factual information to support itself without overloading a non-academic reader, and the clear and well organized writing style further contributes to the book's effectiveness. It is in many ways a traveling-exhibit of sorts, whose well-captioned images will provide a significant amount of interesting information to those who choose not to stop and read the more detailed text.

Thomas keeps the experience of individuals in the fore and helps put the reader in the place of the person on the auction block about to be separated from their family forever. The experience of fear and powerlessness created through the Middle Passage, seasoning, arbitrary punishment and humiliation, the constant threat of loss of family and community through sale, and the desire to resist slavery by any means

possible are brought into focus. Thomas emphasizes, that though enslaved, Africans and African Americans always maintained their own identity and constantly resisted slavery and racism in a variety of ways, from open revolt to working slow. By consistently referring to enslaved Africans and African Americans as "my ancestors", she brings their experience closer to home and provides a sense of identity to the enslaved that a reader may not feel in a more academic account. As she states in her afterword, "Lest We Forget is a tribute to those whose lives are told through the documents you've seen and read.". Indeed it is, and it is a very effective, non-academic, presentation of a very central element of American history -- Slavery.